



THE LONG WALK

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There's a stretch of road in Southern Illinois that some folks call "The Long Walk." In actuality, it's little more than a five mile path of paved road with mismatched spots of gravel, but for the better part of a century, it has served as the alternate route of travel for residents seeking the shortest distance from Elco to Ullin. On any given day, the road is free and alone. Since the installation of highway 127, it has become little more than a haven for bicyclists, farm tractors, and the occasional late night drunks looking to avoid a speed trap. Still, despite its depreciation over time, the drive has a history, for long before pavement took what was left of the road's dignity and tourists enjoyed its scenic beauty, there were walkers—individuals who strolled along as if the road belonged to them.

In telling this, a story exists that many may not know, a story that concerns the road and two young girls whose friendship matured from simply taking a walk.

Southern Illinois, Summer 1922

A 15-year old plowgirl, Jolean Ferguson had little, if anything, to be admired in her appearance. From dusk until dawn she worked about her father's farm, doing every chore from feeding the chickens to milking what few cows her father owned. In the planting season, she bore the marks of days spent tending to the fields, and in the winter, her hands stayed cut and sliced from gathering wood stored outside. Jolean was hard and rugged, her young body stocky and unladylike.

Simply standing too close to Jolean could be a task, since often she was ripe. The girl had the uncanny practice of bathing herself in her father's pond, and when finished, of tying back her sandy, brown hair with a piece of sea grass string she kept wrapped around her left wrist. Ultimately, this behavior resulted in a foul-smelling creature with coarse, wired hair that bleached out in the

summer sun. To her credit, she fit in just fine, for oddly enough, Jolean was the norm in her community. Her neighbor and best friend, Alyson Reynolds, was the exception, however.

Alyson was not wealthy, but her father, William, had been blessed with the ability to make money. After returning from fighting in the Great War, he set about to the task of living out a dream he concocted while figuring out how to not die. If entrepreneurship had a spokesperson, it was he, and scraping together what little money he had saved, William somehow managed to turn the four acres of worthless ground he owned into some of the most prime land in the county. Hiring black workers from Ullin and nearby Sandusky, William planted sugar cane, and before long, he was processing, packaging, and selling his product throughout the state and beyond. There wasn't a grocery store within twenty miles that didn't know the name William Reynolds, and it showed.

The extra money allowed William to sport a new Model T, and his daughter could buy a new mail-ordered summer dress that held up better than the rags the local merchants passed off for clothing. On Sundays, Alyson's mother, Vida, would bring candy to church and William would sometimes take the children for rides.

But for all she was worth, Alyson remembered the days before the war when her family had nothing. Thus, when the evening would come, and Jolean had finished toiling on the farm, the Alyson and Jolean would join up in friendship and walk the Ullin road, talking as young girls do in the prime of their youthful lives.

"So, are you goin' to the Mt. Pisgah ice cream supper Saturday night?" asked Alyson.

"I guess," replied Jolean.

"I hear there's gonna be a band."

"Really? Who?"

"Not sure."

“Well, as long as it’s not Buddy Sims and his group. They couldn’t carry tune if they had to.”

Alyson chuckled at the comment and reached down to pick up a stone. In the distance, the sound of a car rumbled, and while she was bent down, she looked forward to see the plume of dust being generated by its traveling. “You better look out,” said Alyson jokingly. “I think Buddy heard what you said..”

Watching the vehicle get closer, both girls moved to the side of the road. “If it is,” added Jolean, “he’s drivin’ like a nut. That car must be goin’ every bit of thirty.”

The closer the car came, the more Jolean and Alyson became curious about who was actually driving the automobile. It was, as Jolean had reported, going excessively fast, and locals seldom cruised the road so late in the day. With no time to scramble to safety, the girls clung to the belief that it had to be someone they knew, a familiar face descending upon them, but as the car closed in, it slowed down, and the face inside was anything but familiar.

“Hello, girls.”

“Hi,” stuttered Jolean, mesmerized by the sight of a handsome, young man sitting behind the wheel of a dingy, Ford truck.

Stunned, as never before, Alyson had to be nudged by Jolean into speaking. “Hi, I-I-I mean--hello.”

The young man smiled and gripped the steering wheel. “Did I scare you?”

“Who? Us?” asked Jolean. “No, no, no. We were just...”

“We were just walking home,” interrupted Alyson.

“Well, I can give you a ride, if you like.”

Alyson, looked down at the side of the door and read the words, HENDERSON FARMS. “Do you work for them?” she asked, pointing to the name.

The young man, unsure, leaned his head out and

looked at the door. "Oh, no. I mean-- this is my uncle's truck."

"Your uncle?" questioned Jolean.

"Yeah, my name's Frank. And yours?"

"I'm Jolean, and this here is Alyson."

"We live nearby," said Alyson, showing her eagerness.

"I gathered that," replied Frank, holding back a laugh. "Say, it's late. Do you want a ride?"

Alyson took a moment to think about it, but an odd look from Jolean held her in check. "I think we'll pass."

"Are you sure?"

Alyson looked again at Jolean, but still the decision was affirmative. "Yeah-yeah, um, we're sure."

"Alright, then. You girls be careful. Okay?"

"Yeah, thanks," said Alyson, and with that the young man took off, leaving Alyson and Jolean alone on the road.

"You wanted to go, didn't you, Alyson?" asked Jolean, putting her head down.

Alyson paused. "Awe, come on," she said, taking her friend by the arm. "So, what happened on the farm today?"

Her words caught Jolean off guard, but enthusiastically she gripped Alyson's wrist. "Well, Pa was working with..."

As they walked off in the twilight of the evening, their voices faded into the sounds of crickets chirping in the heavy foliage. Yet, there was a trace of their encounter still on Alyson's mind. She did want to go with the young man, as Jolean had suspected, but Alyson's desire was to be alone with him, and inside Alyson felt ashamed—not for the want but for the thought of excluding her friend from a convenient ride.

Jolean may have been poor in both appearance and economic status, but she had a heart of gold not easily

matched by other girls her age. Once, during the war when Alyson was deathly ill with fever, it was Jolean who sat with her as Alyson's mother did yard work. So sick was Alyson that neighbors refused to visit. Even the pastor, despite his Christian oath, avoided the house. Alyson never forgot Jolean's gesture and often thought about repaying her friend, but what could she give? There was nothing on earth that could match the kindness displayed by a fragile creature such as Jolean.

Later, with the evening dew settling on the Reynolds' homestead, William walked out onto the front porch only to discover his daughter relaxing in the front porch swing.

"Can I join ya?" he asked, gently closing the screen door. Alyson scooted over and opened up a place for her father to sit. "It's a nice evening, isn't it?" he continued.

"Yeah, it sure is."

"It's cool, too. Thank God for the cool."

Alyson looked up at her father. His figure towered beside her, and his outline sat silhouetted in the glow of window's light. "Pa?"

"Yes."

"What was Jolean's mother like?"

William turned and looked at his daughter. "You already know. I've told you before."

"I know, but that was when I was ten. I'm sixteen now."

Resuming a comfortable posture, William looked out across the yard. "She was a good women, kind and considerate. Like Jolean, she had hair like wire and a spirit for work that most men don't have."

"Was she fun to be around?"

"As fun as most, I guess. I remember this one time--and this is before she was married-- that all us kids went on a hayride out to Mowery Pond near Wetaug. Anyway, we got our hands on some grapevine and smoked

it.” William paused and started to laugh.

“What?” asked Alyson, snickering.

“Our lips swelled up so big that they looked like balloons. Everyone I knew hid themselves until the swellin’ went down—everyone except Jolean’s mother. She just showed them off like they were trophies. No, she was good woman—a fine woman.” Taking a moment to reflect, William quickly snapped out of his thoughts and looked at his daughter. “Why are you so curious anyway?”

“I don’t know. I was just thinkin’ about it.”

Changing the subject, William slapped Alyson on the leg. “You goin’ to the ice cream supper on Saturday?”

“Yeah, I guess. Jolean’s goin’.”

“They’re gonna have a band, you know.”

“Yeah, that’s what I’ve heard.”

William’s voice fell silent. Alyson could tell he was tired. “Well, I’m gonna go to bed. You don’t stay out here too long. You hear?”

“Okay.”

“Well, good night.” William leaned over and gave Alyson a kiss on the forehead. “I love you,” he whispered.

“I love you too, Pa,” she replied, as he rose to his feet.

William was almost to the door when Alyson called for him. “Pa.”

“Yeah, what is it?”

“Thanks.”

William smiled and pointed to the door. “You don’t forget what I said. Alright?”

Alyson acknowledged with a nod.

The next morning, Alyson was given the chore of walking the long road in search of a gas cap that had come loose from one of her father’s trucks. She had walked nearly two miles before finding it lying in the center of the road, smashed and bent. Picking it up, she grabbed the object and hastily started her walk back home. A few

minutes into her return, though, the sound of a horn honking behind her summoned her attention, and when she looked back, she saw the young man, Frank, in the truck, speeding toward her.

“Hey! What you doin’ way out here?” asked Frank, pulling up beside her.

“Lookin’ for this gas cap off one of my pa’s trucks,” she said, showing him the cap.

“Huh? Need a ride?”

Alyson looked at the truck and studied the thought for a moment. “Sure,” she answered, and hurrying to the other side, she opened the door and took her place beside him on the small bench seat.

“There’s a spring that pokes out over there,” said Frank in a coy tone. “You might want to scoot closer.”

“Really?” asked Alyson. “It’s not bothering me.”

“You sure? You’re not just saying that to be nice?”

“No. I’m fine.”

After she gave him an awkward look, Frank shook his hand and plying the clutch, he pulled back on the gear shift, growling the gears into place in the process. As they rode along, Alyson couldn’t help but feel she was on display for his wandering eyes. Several times she caught him glancing at her legs.

“So, what are you doing around here?” she asked.

“My uncle is Dunkin Henderson. I’m visiting from Salem.”

“The home of Lincoln?”

“Missour’a,” replied Frank. “This is my first time bein’ here.”

“Oh, I see.”

Alyson turned her attention back to the road. Her house was coming into view. “I live up here.”

Frank slowed down the truck and turned onto the driveway. “What’s that?” he asked, pointing to a large metal basin.

“A molasses pit.”

“Is that what your pa does?”

“Yup.”

The truck pulled up to the house and came to a screeching halt. William, who had been in the barn working on a tractor, stepped out into the sunlight.

“Alyson Reynolds, get down here!” he called.

Alyson turned and started to walk to the barn. Vida came to screen door and watched in suspicion as Frank sped off and drove down the driveway back out to the road.

“Who was that?” asked William.

“Frank somethin’ or another.”

“Frank somethin’ or another, ey? I noticed him driving one of Dunkin’s trucks. Does he work for them?”

“No, it’s Dunkin’s nephew from Salem, Missouri’a. He’s visitin’.”

“I see. Well, you be careful, young lady. “You’re gettin’ to that age when boys want more than to skip stones at the creek.”

“Father!” exclaimed Alyson.

“Well, I’m just sayin’-- be careful. Now, get out of here and go up to the house. Your mother needs you to help with the cannin’.”

Angered by the comment, and taking it as a personal insult, Alyson threw the gas cap to the ground and pouted off in a tromp.

“Girl!”

“Yes!” snapped Alyson.

William held up the gas cap. “I’ll talk to you later about this.”

A chill went through Alyson, and she turned again toward the house.

“Ug!” she grunted as she angrily opened the screen door. Going to the kitchen, she found her mother, Vida, tending to a large kettle.

“Your father’s right, Alyson.”

“About what?”

“The boy.”

Alyson walked to the cabinet and pulled out a glass. “It’s Dunkin’s nephew,” she said, dipping the cup into a cool bucket of water. “All he did was give me a ride home.”

“It don’t matter,” said Vida, removing a jar from the boiling water in the kettle. “Remember that girl up in Mill Creek? Some triflin’ piece of trash came through here and got her in the family way. I won’t have that happenin’ to you! Hear me?”

Alyson lowered the glass slowly, and in a fit, slammed it down onto the counter. Then, in a burst of energy, she ran from the kitchen and bolted from the house.

Going after her, Vida ran to the porch. “Alyson! Alyson!”

Hearing the commotion, William left his labor and looked toward the house. “William, she’s runnin’ away!”

Looking out across the yard, William saw Alyson vanish into the sugar cane. Immediately, he took off in a sprint, being followed by several of the workers. When they arrived at the cane field, William stopped and tried to make out a path the girl may have taken. “You men! Go in and see if you can find anything.”

As a group, the workers entered. Fanning out, they started to call her name. “Alson!, Alson!” boomed their voices. “Where ya at, girl? Ya pa’s worried ‘bout ya! Alson!”

With the search on, Vida turned to the only comfort she could find, her Bible. All through the remainder of the day, she sat on the porch reading from the Book of Psalms. The sky, once bright with a crystal shade of blue, crackled into scattering of pink tracer clouds and, finally, without even being aware of it, Vida was alone in the dim of night. Just as all hope seemed to be lost, William and the men emerged from the darkness. Placing her Bible down, Vida

rushed out into the yard.

“Where’s Alyson? Where’s my girl?”

“It’s okay, Mama,” said William, comforting her in the shelter of his embrace. “She’s with Jolean.”

“Well, why didn’t you bring her home?”

“She’s helpin’ in the fields.”

“This late?”

“She’ll be okay.”

“But, what about her runnin’ off?”

“Let her get a good taste of what Jolean goes through in a day. That’ll temper her down some.” Pulling her close, William turned to look at the workers whose sweat-drenched bodies glistened like puddles of silver in the moonlight. “Let’s get these men somethin’ to drink and eat. They did a good day’s work.”

Across the way at the Ferguson farm, Jolean and Alyson busied themselves with pulling weeds from a drainage ditch that for sometime had been backing up. Alyson, unaccustomed to the work, frequently paused to complain, but being given no sympathy from Jolean, she continued on until both girls expired from the heat.

“Lord! Does it have to be so hot?” asked Alyson, lying back on the ground.

“You act like it’s the end of the world. You should have been out here at 10 a.m. Now, that was hot!”

Alyson turned her head to look at Jolean who was breathing heavily on the ground next to her. “I’m sorry for being the way I am, Jolean.”

Jolean smiled. “That’s okay. Your heart’s in the right place.”

Looking up to the sky, Alyson turned her thoughts to another subject, one more severe. “Why don’t you ever talk about your mother?”

Jolean thought for a moment. “I don’t know. I just never do,” she replied.

“Do you think about her?”

“Sometimes, when I’m alone.”

Alyson looked back to the girl. “I remember when I was sick and you helped.”

“What?”

“When Daddy was gone to war, I remember you comin’ to sit with me while Mama worked.”

“You’ve got a good memory. I’ll hand you that.”

“It’s not my memory,” replied Alyson. Pausing, she cleared her throat. “You’re like sister, Jolean.” Rolling over, Jolean moved close and hugged Alyson. “But you stink something fierce,” Alyson said, chuckling.

“Why you...!” And with that, the girls started to laugh and slap each other. “Race you to the pond!” shouted Jolean, jumping up and hurrying off into the night.

Following closely after her friend, Alyson scampered along, and arriving at the pond, she plunged into the muddy pool. Nearby, a gathering of cows mooed, and the girls, excited, splashed about until both of them succumbed to their tiredness.

“It’s getting late, Jolean. I need to get home.”

“I’ll walk ya.” Stepping out of the pond, the girls stood and collected themselves. “Your ma’s probably gonna kill ya when you get home.”

“I’ll be okay. I’ll tell her I fell in or somethin’.”

Jolean nodded and accepted the lie for what it was. Then, tying her hair back with a piece of sea grass string, she headed to the road. Stepping out onto the gravel, the girls started to walk.

“You still goin’ to the ice cream supper tomorrow evenin’?” asked Jolean.

“Yeah.”

“Good. I’ll see you there.”

Pleased, Alyson grinned and plotted their course to her farm. Shortly thereafter, two bright headlights beamed from a curve behind them.

“Hey, Alyson?” asked Jolean, tugging on Alyson’s shirt. “What do you make of that?”

Spinning around, Alyson peered down the road at the lights. Stunned, like two captivated deer, the girls froze in their place until the vehicle was stopped directly in front of them.

“You again,” said a familiar voice.

“It’s Frank!” Alyson exclaimed.

“Who?”

“The boy from Henderson Farms. Remember? Come on!”

Running to the truck window, Alyson peeked into the cab. “Where’ve you been?” she asked.

“The movies.”

“Oh.”

“Say, it’s late for you, isn’t it? What you doin’ out here?”

“We’ve been workin’,” Jolean answered.

“We’ve been swimmin’ in the creek,” interrupted Alyson, cutting Jolean off mid-sentence.

“The creek, ey? Well, if you need a ride, get in.”

Alyson looked at Jolean. “Can you give her a lift back?”

Frank looked at Jolean, “Sure. No problem. Just get in back, and when I stop, I’ll let you get up front.”

“Geeze, thanks!” shouted Jolean climbing into the bed of the truck, while Alyson took a seat in the cab. With everyone situated, the truck moved forward and down the road until a few minutes later when it slowed to enter Alyson’s driveway.

“You better stop here, Frank. If my pa sees your truck, he’ll give ya the business end of his shotgun.”

Not wanting to experience such a gift, Frank obliged and brought the truck to a slow halt on account of the screeching breaks. Quickly, Alyson opened the door and jumped out into the night.

“Hey,” Frank called.

“Yeah?”

“Uncle was telling me there’s an ice cream supper happenin’ tomorrow night. You goin’?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I’ll probably see ya there.”

“Okay.”

Alyson looked to the back of the truck and ran to help Jolean climb down.

“Night, Jolean.”

“Night, Alyson.”

Alyson smiled and gave the girl a hug. Then, with a wave goodbye to Frank, she darted off toward the house.

Enthused, Jolean hurried to the cab, jumped inside, and sat up straight and proper. “Drive,” she said, and Frank slammed the truck into gear. However, as he pulled out onto the road, he stopped the truck.

“What’s wrong?” asked Jolean.

“Get out,” demanded Frank.

“What?”

“Out, out, out!”

“But why?”

“I’ve got to get home! Now git!”

Frank leaned over and opened the door. Then, with a firm push of his hand, he forced Jolean to exit.

Crying, the young girl looked backed in. “But I thought you were my friend.”

“You only wish,” said Frank, and with that the rascal drove off, leaving the girl to sob herself home.

The next day was hot. By mid-afternoon, a thick, milky haze had settled along the tree line, and a tired, aching Alyson Reynolds paced herself by taking short breaks in the cool of her porch. By the time she and her family loaded up in the truck to go to the ice cream supper, Alyson had managed to get in a full hour’s rest.

Arriving at Mt. Pisgah, everyone involved was in a bustle. Men cooked food and the women sold pie and homemade ice-cream, churned in the old-time fashion.

People of all ages were present. The few surviving Civil War veterans sat proudly in their places beneath the large elm trees that protected the church. Grandmothers received hugs from children who had been reminded to respect their elders.

For her part, Jolean stayed close to Vida, shaking hands and learning the names of neighbors she saw only on special events, such as the social. It was during this tour, when out of the corner of her eye, Alyson spotted Frank relaxing, talking with his uncle and other men of a similar age. Sensing she was staring at him, Frank turned and looked at her. Mesmerized, their eyes met, but as they did, Alyson was attacked by a hug from behind.

“Jolean!” exclaimed Alyson, freeing herself from Jolean’s grasp.

“Awe, that’s nothin’,” said the girl. “Now, this is a hug.” Jolean lowered herself, and in a mighty heave, she lifted Alyson off the ground in a bear hug that brought Alyson to a scream of joy.

“Jolean, you’re crazy! Put me down!”

“Come on, Alyson. I’ve got to tell you somethin’.”

Sneaking off to a nearby place free of distraction, Jolean and Alyson made themselves scarce to the crowd. Looking around and realizing Alyson was gone, Frank left his uncle and started to scan the crowd for any sign of the young girl he had been pursuing. Walking in and out of the clumps of conversationalists, he then decided to search the border of the church. As he made his way around a truck, he spotted them, Alyson and Jolean, sitting in the shade of a tree line.

Eager, Frank walked up, his hands in his pockets, and his facial expression in a curious glow. “What ya doin’ out here?” he asked with a grin.

Immediately, Alyson stood. Jolean continued to sit. Walking toward them, Frank was completely unaware of the deserving answer he would get. As Alyson came

within striking distance, she let him have it with a foot to the groin. Gasping for air, the youth fell forward and held himself. Then, with a another kick, she supplanted her foot to the side of his face, instantly causing swelling in his right eye.

“Go home! Go home! Get out! Get out!” shouted Alyson. “How do you like it, you triflin’ piece of Missouri’a trash?”

Rolling about, Frank whimpered.

“Let’s go, Jolean,” said Alyson, looking back at the girl, who by all accounts, was in a state of shock. Rising, Jolean maneuvered past Frank and Alyson, and Alyson, holding out her hand, accepted Jolean’s, squeezing it tightly to lead her away.

“Why’d you do that, Alyson?”

Alyson smiled and gave Jolean a hug. In her ear, Alyson whispered, “I’m paying you back!”

The End